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Deities above animals. On the transformation of Near Eastern iconography in Minoan Crete

ABSTRACT

The representation of a male or female deity standing or sitting on the back of an animal constitutes a widely spread and long-lived *topos* in the iconography of the Ancient Near East and beyond. In the Aegean Bronze Age, however, this pictorial formula for defining the elevated character of a deity as dominating or being protected by an animal or a hybrid creature was widely absent, always constituting a foreign idea which was never really integrated into the repertory of Aegean imagery. A closer comparative analysis of the few examples of this “orientalizing” motif formula which can be sporadically observed, mainly in the seal glyptic of Neopalatial Crete, is therefore of interest. This material allows us to define Minoan imitations, adaptations, individual variants, misinterpreted versions as well as other forms of transformation of the Near Eastern prototypes, demonstrating the insufficient familiarity of Minoan artists and beholders with this iconic concept. Thus, in spite of the plethora of examples of the transfer of iconographic motifs from the Near East into the artistic language of Minoan Crete, the topic of the deity above a quadruped shows quite plainly the contrasting iconographic concepts of defining deities in both regions and enables us to study more closely the mechanisms of the Minoan appropriation of Near Eastern principles of representing deities. Moreover, this topic urges us to question the validity of the scholarly concept of an “Eastern +Mediterranean *koiné*” with regard to iconographic motifs and religious ideas. Instead of being a coequal member of and active participant in this *koiné*, Neopalatial Crete seems to have been positioned rather at the periphery of this ideological realm.

KEYWORDS: Minoan Crete, iconography of deities, deities above animals, artistic transformation, Eastern Mediterranean *koiné*

Already since the time of Arthur Evans, it is beyond question that Minoan Crete possessed strong ties to its neighbouring partner civilizations in the Near East, the Syro-Palestinian region and Egypt. Given the close trans-cultural interrelations and especially the rich evidence of Minoan symbols and iconographical motifs stimulated by the Near East, nowadays it is challenging to delve more deeply into the character of these parallels and to propose critical methodological questions which go beyond the simple detection of similarities (Karetsou and Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2000; Phillips 1995; 2006, 297-299; 2008; Panagiotopoulos 2004; Aruz 2008). In this paper, I will focus upon a specific iconographical motif, that of an anthropomorphic deity positioned

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above an animal. This motif of a male or female deity standing on the back of a quadruped was highly popular in the Ancient Near East during the third and second millennia as well as in later periods (Malten 1928, 98-115; Güterbock 1983, 204-211; Winter 1983, 282-283, 450-455; Haas 1994, 530-538, figs. 72-75; Teeter 2002, 335-360; Schroer 2008, 42-43, 63-64), whereas it is almost unknown to the iconography of Minoan Crete and of Mycenaean Greece (see also Blakolmer 2014). As a consequence, this particular case study may enable us to gain a better understanding of the Minoan handling of the foreign iconography, in fact not so much in terms of the similarities themselves but rather of the Minoan resistance to the adoption of this Near Eastern formula of depicting deities.

In Aegean iconography combinations of anthropomorphic figures and animals occur frequently, as is also the case in the motif of a Master or Mistress of animals, deities flanked, accompanied or in another form of confrontation with animals and hybrid creatures (cf. Marinatos 1993, 153-154; Barclay 2001; Crowley 2008; Dubcová 2010, 109-110). However, we rarely come across the depiction of a deity standing or seated above the back of an attributive animal – an iconographical *topos* which, as it seems, almost never entered the realm of images in the Aegean. Therefore, the few images of a deity represented on top of a so-called “pedestal animal”, images created by imitating iconographical models from the Near East, are even more interesting.

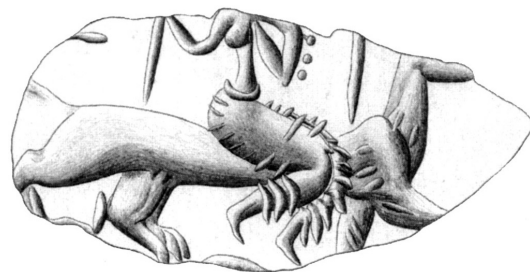


Fig. 1. Seal image from Ayia Triada (CMS II6, no. 33).

Stimulations by the Near Eastern iconography may be suspected in motifs of divine figures riding on the back of a quadruped which could have been more familiar to the Minoans than standing above an animal. This is exemplified by several seal images which show a female figure wearing the flounced skirt and sitting on the back of a so-called Minoan dragon, a supernatural creature inspired by the so-called Babylonian dragon (Levi 1945, 270-280; 1961; Gill 1963; Poursat 1976; Crowley 1989, 54-57, 425; Palaiologou 1995; Aruz 2008, 172, figs. 337-338; Phillips 2008, I, 211-213). This motif is evidenced by seal impressions from Ayia Triada (Fig. 1) (CMS II6, no. 33), a Minoan cylinder seal from Ayia Pelagia (CMS VI, no. 321; Gill 1961; Davaras and Soles 1995, 54, cat. no. 29; Marinatos 1993, 154, fig. 131; Blakolmer 2010, 41, fig. 21) and a seal-stone from Mycenae (CMS I, no. 167; Krzyszkowska 2010, 183, fig. 17.15c). A striking feature of this motif of a goddess with raised hands and riding side-saddle is that she is not so much seated upon but rather added beside the animal's back in an unrealistic way. This rather “ideal”, symbolic connection between a goddess and her supporting animal becomes even more evident on relief plates of blue glass paste from Dendra which present a goddess wearing an oriental polos and seated beside the body of a quadruped (Persson 1931, 65, fig. 43; 1942, 133, fig. 24 left side; Wiesner 1968, 118, fig. 21c).



Fig. 2. Seal-stone in the Giamalakis collection (CMS III, no. 360).

Leaving aside three-dimensional figurines, Aegean artists were always confronted with considerable problems when they tried to represent people riding (Levi 1951; Wiesner 1968, 118, fig. 21; Crowel 1981, 45-53; Kelder 2012; Blakolmer 2014, 192-194). A slightly more realistic variant of an obviously divine or mythological figure riding a quadruped is evidenced by a seal-stone in the Giamalakis collection (Fig. 2) which shows the symbolical motif of a male figure in reduced scale seated on a lion (*CMS* III, no. 360). One is tempted to argue that, to the same extent as this motif appears non-Aegean to us, a deity standing on the back of a quadruped might have appeared quite uncommon to people in the Aegean Bronze Age.

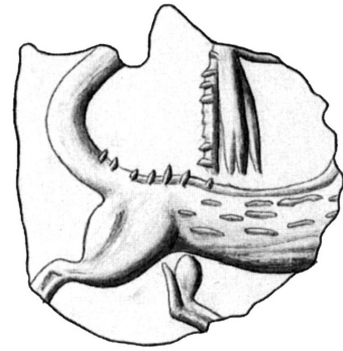


Fig. 3. Seal image from Kato Zakros (*CMS* II7, no. 77).

Despite these iconographical problems of representing deities riding an attributive animal, their depiction as standing on top of its back caused even more substantial troubles for Aegean artists. Two seal images from Kato Zakros can with great probability be connected to the Near Eastern iconographical *topos* of the deity standing above its attributive animal: a fragmented seal impression from Kato Zakros shows on top of the back of a Minoan dragon what can probably be defined as the skirt with vertical central bands and the bent arm of a female figure at small scale (Fig. 3) (*CMS* II7, no. 77).

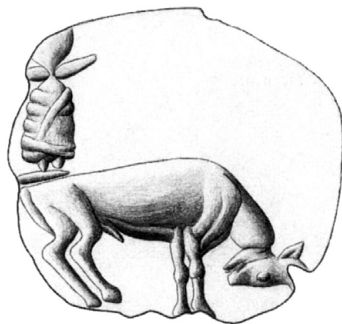


Fig. 4. Seal image from Kato Zakros (*CMS* II7, no. 29).

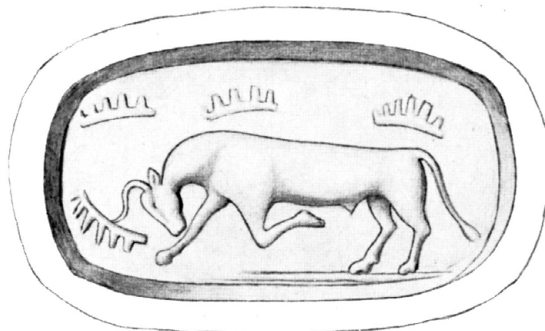


Fig. 5. Seal image from Phaistos (*CMS* II5, no. 268).

A small-scale female figure with both arms stretched out to the side and standing above the buttocks of a bull is preserved on other seal impressions from Kato Zakros (Fig. 4) (*CMS* II7, no. 29). Although the bull has lowered its head in an aggressive manner, an interpretation as a bull-leaping scene appears very unlikely (cf. Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 1997, II, 651-653, figs. 718-719; Marinatos 1993, 164, fig. 152). A Protopalatial seal image, possibly, can deliver further hints for our understanding of the posture of this bull: in scholarship, thus far, a seal image from the “Archivio di cretule” at Phaistos (Fig. 5) was interpreted as a grazing bull surrounded by tufts of grass (*CMS* II5, no. 268; Krzyszkowska 2010, 171, fig. 17.1c). In contrast to that interpretation, a couple of years ago, L. Vance Watrous proposed that this motif – via analogy with the lowermost scene on the Egyptian Narmer palette – should be viewed as a raging bull

symbolically destroying the city-walls which are disintegrated into several segments (Watrous 1998, 22; 2004, 272-273, fig. 9.7; cf. Schroer and Keel 2005, 222, no. 122; p. 232-239, nos. 132-133; see also *CMS* VI, no. 52). If this “Egyptianizing” interpretation really applies to the MM II seal image from Phaistos, this would completely change not only our understanding of a peacefully grazing bull, but it would give an excellent new meaning to the aforementioned seal image from Neopalatial Kato Zakros (Fig. 4): a female deity standing above an over-life-sized raging bull in its function as protector, according to the Near Eastern iconic formula. As a consequence, this Minoan seal image, which constitutes a unique and somewhat naive compilation of motifs, neither conforms to the Near Eastern iconography, nor does it match the iconography of deities in Neopalatial Crete.



Fig. 6. Seal image from Knossos (*CMS* II8, no. 262).



Fig. 7. Stone relief block from Malatya (after Riemschneider 1955, pl. 44 above).

Irrespective of the question whether the image on seal impressions from Knossos (Fig. 6) (*CMS* II8, no. 262) was inspired by the Syro-Anatolian glyptic of the Middle Bronze Age (Aruz 2008, 173, figs. 344-345) or reflects the “Egyptianizing” motif of the moon-god Thoth with his monkey-like companion (Karetsou and Andreadaki-Vlazaki 2000, 177, no. 162), it is beyond dispute that this lentoid seal with “orientalising” iconography constitutes a Minoan product dated to LM I (Younger 1979, 261 n. 13; Weingarten 1994, 155 with n. 24; Phillips 2008, II, 84, no. 142). Of interest for our question is the small preserved part of the crouching feline upon which the deity is standing or seated (Malten 1928, 131-132, fig. 77; Younger 1995, 181-182, no. 185; Marinatos 1987, 127, fig. 5,2), comparable to the motif on a stone relief block from Malatya (Fig. 7) (Riemschneider 1955, 85, pl. 44 above). This seal image stands out not only for accurately reflecting a Near Eastern motif in broad terms, but also because the Levantine style seems

to have been imitated by the linear design of the god's dress (cf. Schroer 2008, 74-75, nos. 266-267; p. 78-83, nos. 271-273, 275-278; p. 122-136, nos. 328-332, 335, 337-350).

A further example of an "orientalising" pedestal animal is presented on a lentoid seal from Mycenae (Fig. 8) (*CMS VII*, no. 118) which shows a deity in the scheme of the "Potnios theron" – an iconographical *topos* borrowed from the Near East and well integrated into Aegean iconography (Chittenden 1947; Spartz 1962; Marinatos 1993, 153-154, 167-171; Müller 2000; Barclay 2001; Crowley 2008; 2010). Hitherto unique in the Aegean, though, is the phenomenon that the central deity is seated on a frontal leonine head. We can hardly interpret it as anything other than an "orientalising" element (Evans 1935, 402, fig. 333; Nilsson 1968, 235, 359, fig. 170; Foster 1979, 72; cf. Marinatos 2000, 21-27, figs. 1.33-36; Winter 1983, 450-455), the remnant of a pedestal animal.

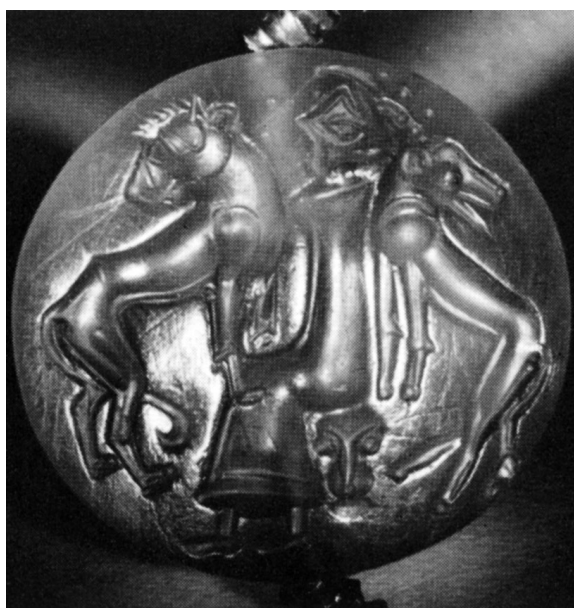


Fig. 8. Seal-stone in the British Museum, London (*CMS VII*, no. 118).

The Aegean iconography of deities which mostly appear in association with animals or hybrid creatures, without any doubt, was stimulated by the Near East. What strikes us, though, is the fact that in the Aegean only very particular motif variants, such as the deity leading or accompanied by an "animal of power", were chosen or created (see in general Nilsson 1968, 354-356, figs. 163-165; Marinatos 2010, 168-171; Dubcová 2012, 31-32), whereas other motifs such as the deity above an animal never really became accepted. The aversion to this oriental motif is probably best demonstrated by the deliberate omission of a pedestal animal in Aegean motifs which can be directly compared with Near Eastern ones, such as in the case of the Master of animals who seizes and holds aloft two wild animals each by one hind-leg, for example, on a seal-stone from Elateia (Fig. 9) and on a Syrian cylinder seal (Fig. 10) (Müller 2000; Barclay 2001; Crowley 2010, esp. figs. 1, 21, 22 and 24; for the Near Eastern models see Cornelius 2004, 56, pls. 44-45; Schroer 2008, 196, no. 425).



Fig. 9. Seal-stone from Elateia
(CMS V Suppl. 2, no. 113).



Fig. 10. Syrian cylinder seal, Louvre, Paris
(after Schroer 2008, 197, no. 425).

The unfamiliarity of Minoan artists with the Near Eastern iconographical formula of the deity above an animal also becomes clear in a comparison of the goddess depicted in Xeste 3 in Akrotiri (Fig. 11) (Doumas 1992, 158-167, figs. 122-130; Marinatos 1987; Chapin 2001;

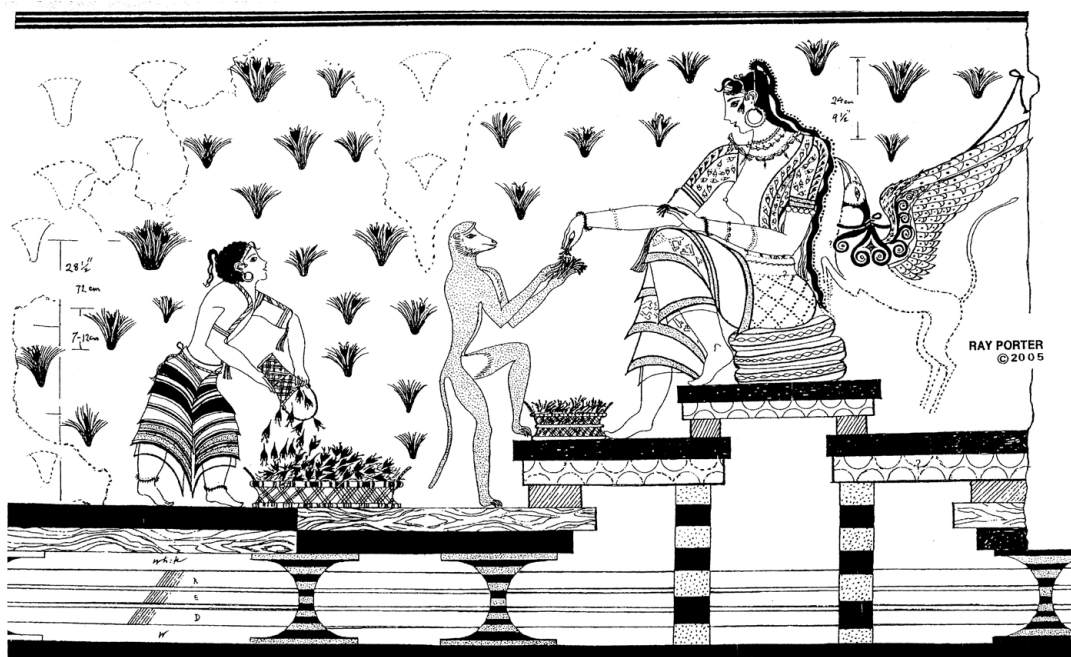


Fig. 11. Mural painting from Xeste 3, Akrotiri, Thera. Drawing by Ray Porter
(after Betancourt 2007, 125, fig. 6.15).



Fig. 12. Syrian cylinder seal in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna (after Winter 1983, fig. 491).

Vlachopoulos 2008) and a Syrian cylinder seal in Vienna (Fig. 12) (Seyrig 1969, 479-481, fig. 1; Bleibtreu 1981, 69-70, no. 83; Winter 1983, 452-453, fig. 491; Marinatos 2000, 114-117, figs. 6.4-5), a parallel drawn first by Joan Aruz (1995, 14-15, figs. 11-12a; 2008, 142-143, 224, figs. 295-296). As Henri Seyrig (1969, 479-481) remarked already in the 1960s, the iconography of this cylinder seal exhibits several Aegean elements; especially the long hair and the breechcloth of both men to the left side remind us of Egyptian representations of people from *keftiu* (Aruz 1995, 14-16; 2008, 142-143). Their wasp-like waist and their walking posture, uncommon in Near Eastern images, allows us to suppose a Minoan iconographical model for the Syrian seal-engraver. Of interest for our question are the pedestal animals on this seal from the Levant. If Aruz is correct in her interpretation of this seal image as an imitation of a Minoan frieze similar to that in Xeste 3, the scene of the goddess seated on her throne and accompanied by a protective griffin would have been “orientalised” by the Syrian seal-engraver by adding a lion and an ibex as pedestal animals which, obviously, were absent in the postulated Aegean model. As the Xeste 3 painting and further examples demonstrate, in Minoan iconography the divine sphere could have been expressed by a podium-like construction instead of the addition of pedestal animals (Krattenmaker 1995, 125-127, fig. 4; Rehak 1995, 104-105; Otto 2011; see also the ivory relief lid from Mochlos: Soles 2016).

RESULTS

All examples depicting a deity above an animal in the Aegean constitute individual cases which should be seen as the exception proving the rule, meaning that this pictorial formula was hardly compatible with the Minoan iconography. Moreover, none of them really applies to the Near Eastern models. Nevertheless, these examples may allow us to make the following ten observations:

1. It is probably no coincidence that most examples of the motif under discussion derive from the Neopalatial period of Crete, the period when, for the first time, strategies for the iconographical definition of deities were developed (Blakolmer 2012; 2015, 207-211; in print).
2. As the most likely candidate of origin of these iconographical motifs in the Aegean, we may suppose the Syro-Palestinian region and Hittite Anatolia.
3. As far as can be judged, none of the anthropomorphic figures above an animal in the Aegean represents a ruler. Instead, this formula was exclusively used for depicting divine figures which were mostly of the female sex (cf. Barclay 2001, 378-379).
4. Although the examples well reflect the Minoan search for iconographical stimulations from the Near East in order to define the sacred character of deities, nothing points to the adoption of individual deities with their protective animals and further attributes.
5. The Minoans were excellent at imitating Near Eastern models by adaptation and improvisation (Panagiotopoulos 2004; Warren 2005; Phillips 2006, 297-299; 2008, I, 229-230). However, whereas hybrid creatures such as the griffin and the Minoan genius were created by this strategy, a distinct and consistent deity above an animal was never developed.
6. The disparate and highly individual examples of this iconic motif suggest that, in fact, nobody coming from the Near East explained this artistic formula to a Minoan artist. It appears conclusive that imported artefacts such as cylinder seals, scarabs and other small-scale objects were the only source of inspiration for Minoan artists who recognized that the association of an anthropomorphic figure with an "animal of power" signifies "sacredness" (Blakolmer 2014, 101-202).
7. Similarly to the Near East, the pedestal animals in the Minoan examples were the lion, the bull and the "dragon". This means that this pictorial formula was not extended to indigenous animals such as the agrimi. This further underlines that this foreign *topos* never really became an integral part of the repertory of religious imagery in the Aegean. Instead, it continuously maintained its foreign character.
8. Since there never developed a standardised pictorial formula of deities above animals in Minoan Crete, this motif also remains absent from the iconography of Mycenaean Greece.
9. As the image of the Syrian cylinder seal in Vienna (Fig. 12) probably suggests, Near Eastern artists might have been aware of the Minoan peculiarity of depicting deities without pedestal animals. Thus, they had to add them to clarify the divine character to the Near Eastern beholder.
10. These improvised, individually "orientalised" examples in Minoan Crete make it very probable that no consistent iconography of specific deities with clearly defined theological profile evolved from such stimuli from the Near East (cf. Dubcová 2010; 2012, 33-34; Blakolmer 2012; in print).

In conclusion, it must be stressed that, irrespective of the question whether this case study of the deity above an animal is representative or not, it may provide some fruitful insights into Minoan attitudes towards foreign iconographical motifs and religious ideas coming from the Near

East. It goes without saying that these observations strongly contradict the scholarly concept of Neopalatial Crete as being a coequal member of and active participant in what has been defined as an “Eastern Mediterranean *koiné*” (Marinatos 2007; 2009; 2010; see further Owens 1996).

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